The Whispering Gallery

In Which We Are Invaded by the Fear That H. G. Wells May Become a Garrulous Bore, and in Which We Recommend 'Pierre and Luce.'

By DONALD ADAMS.

IT is, of course, no news that H. G. Wells has written another book. That is one of the accepted recurrences of living, a thing as inevitable as sunrise or the morning paper. The books of Wells follow one another without perceptible interruption, as day follows night. But this book, "The Sacred Places of the Heart" (Macmillan), seems to us to announce that Wells, the novelist, is definitely and irretrievably dead.

We are aware that autopsies have been held over him before. Somewhere back in the Mesozoic period somebody proclaimed that Mr. Wells was forgetting the functions of the novelist in the functions of the prophet. The transformation has been gradual, if it has been a transformation at all. From the first time he sat down to write a serious novel we suspect that in the foreground of Mr. Wells's mind was the ethical or sociological idea about which he wished to unburden himself, and forming dimly back of that the people who were to give this idea the color and motion of life.

But not until we read "The Secret Places of the Heart" did we find Wells's interest in the characters of his story shrunk to such a degree that he appears to use them as they might be used in a Socratic dialogue, merely to provide for the expansion of the idea that grips him. There has been evidence enough in the past that he can work creatively in the novel when he will. Even so late as "Joan and Peter," which for his purpose was a tract on education, he gave body and breath to his people.

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The New World.

THIS new "novel" is dominated by the vision which now possesses Wells completely—the conception of a scientifically ordered society, a new world in which nothing will be "muddled." When we reached page 16 we had a foreboding of what we were in for. Sir Richmond Hardy is speaking:

"We've muddled about in the old ways overlong. Some new sort of world, planned and scientific, has to be got going. Civilization renewed. Rebuilding civilization—while the premises are still occupied and busy. It's an immense enterprise, but it's the only thing to be done."

Sir Richmond, member of a British fuel commission, is consulting Dr. Martineau about his mental state. His work is tearing him to pieces. The physician suggests that they go off together on a motor trip and discuss Sir Richmond's trouble on the way. Feminine entanglements, it appears, are the chief source of Sir Richmond's trouble. Interest in a woman, he argues, is a necessary relaxation from his work. But he and his wife have drifted apart, and his latest entanglement is wearing him down because the woman is jealous of his work.

Sir Richmond's part in the creation of the ordered world, as he sees it, lies in fuel. He is fighting the other members of the commission. He wants to get the whole business of the world's fuel discussed and reported upon as one affair—so that some day it may be handled as one affair—in the general interest.

Then comes his meeting, on the motor trip with Dr. Martineau, with a young American tourist who possesses an historical imagination. That is about the extent of Wells's characterization of Miss Grammont. Her reconstruction of what went on among the ancient monuments of Stonehenge makes her eligible to function in the book. She leaps to Sir Richmond's vision of what can be done with fuel. Their minds run in the same channels, and Dr. Martineau, scenting a new entanglement, takes to his heels.

But this is to be no ordinary entanglement. Father Grammont is a big fuel man too. His daughter and Sir Richmond, having avowed their love, decide that they must separate because of him.

"My father," she tells Sir Richmond, "is the strangest man, obstinate, more than half a savage. For me—I know it—he has the jealousy of ten husbands. If you take me—if our secret becomes manifest—If you are to take me and keep me, then his life and your life will become wholly this Feud, nothing but this Feud. You have to fight him anyhow—that is why I, of all people, must keep out of this quarrel."

And the work which fires them both, the orderly arrangement of the world in fuel at least, would run itself into nothing. That is what matters supremely, and so they are to separate, but to keep in touch through their work. Some day, when her father dies, Miss Grammont will be a big power in fuel.

"We shall be working together," she assures him. "We shall be closer together than many a couple who have never spent a day apart for twenty years."

All this would not have happened in the New World, Wells tells us, through Sir Richmond. They would not have had to choose. "It will be a better instructed and a better behaved world. We shall live at our ease, not perpetually anxious, not resentful and angry. And that will alter all the rules of love. Then we shall think more of the loveliness of other people, because it will no longer be necessary to think so much of the dangers and weaknesses and pitifulness of other people. We shall not have to think of those who depend upon us for happiness and self respect. We shall not have to choose between a wasteful fight for a personal end or the surrender of our heart's desire."

SOMEHOW we have a vague distrust of this New World of Wells, much as we believe him right as to the need for revamping the lines of the old one. We take it that everybody under that new order will be thinking in terms of humanity at large rather than of personal adjustments. Yet for the life of us we cannot see how this breadth of mind can be attained except in the measure in which we think more of the "dangers and weaknesses and pitifulnesses of other people."

Is Wells Muddling?

WE carried away the impression that the more Wells thinks of the necessity for ironing out the creases in this much wrinkled globe, of banishing the word "muddle" from its vocabulary, the more muddled in mind he becomes himself. He has never been troubled by the fear of inconsistency, which Emerson, we think, referred to as "that bugbear of little minds." One book sometimes crossed the track of another, but now he doubles back on himself in the scope of a single volume.

H. G. Wells has long been one of our chief admirations. When we were in college he was the brightest star in the firmament for most of us. He still holds a powerful sway over thousands of minds. But at times in "The Secret Places of the Heart" we were chilled suddenly by the apprehension that if he doesn't watch out, the man of whom it has always been said that he cannot be uninteresting may some day have become a garrulous old bore.

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"Pierre and Luce."

WE can think of nothing further removed in temper from the new Wells book than one of Romain Rolland's which we have just been reading. "Pierre and Luce" (Henry Holt), is an idyll of young love. That, we believe, is one of the hardest things in the world to write. M. Rolland has done it surpassingly well. It demands poetry from a novelist, for one thing, and it demands restraint for another.

It is not to our liking to draw too often invidious comparisons between the work of Europeans and of our own men, but we are unable to recall at the moment a single instance in which a story of the type of "Pierre and Luce" has been successfully handled by an American. In its lyric quality it strongly resembles that part of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel," in which Meredith describes the growth of love between Richard and Lucy. M. Rolland perhaps keeps his feet a little closer to earth, but the rapture is there just the same.

The war is a background for the book, a dark menace that hangs over the heads of these two children. Pierre is 18, and is to be called to the colors in six months. Luce is a little younger. The story of how they grasped eagerly for the bit of happiness that seemed assured is beautifully told, simply and with great tenderness. Charles de Kay's translation appears to be excellent.

For the benefit of those who think of French love stories as being only of one kind, we quote from M. Rolland: "In the heart of Paris there are provinces most naive, little gardens as of cloisters, pure existences as of springs. Paris permits herself to be betrayed by her literature. Those who speak in her name are the most soiled of all. And besides, one only knows too well that a false human consideration often prevents the pure from avowing their innocence. Pierre did not yet understand love, and he was delivered up to the first appeal love made."

Literary Venturers of the Day

II. ROBERT W. SERVICE.

ABOUT twenty-five years ago a young Scotchman, who had taken part in the rush to the Klondike, discovered gold in that far off region in a peculiar manner. He did not dig up any nuggets of the yellow mineral, nor stake out any claims; or if he did stake out claims nothing profitable resulted. But he did by chance happen upon a vein which has brought him in an income that ranks him among the financially successful adventurers to the Klondike.

Robert W. Service.

Having suffered the hardships and shared the perils of the crowd who thronged to the Klondike in '98, Robert William Service came at last to the stage where it was necessary to rely on something more tangible than gold mining for three meals a day. Having served an apprenticeship in a bank in Glasgow, he became a bank clerk in Yukon, and then his fruitless experiences after his quest for gold brought him fame and wealth.

A few verses describing episodes in a gold seeker's life were modestly dispatched to a publisher in Toronto. They were verses, for Mr. Service says that he wishes it to be understood that he writes verse, not poetry. Almost by return mail a request for more of these verses came from the publisher. When enough were collected for a little volume, published first as "Songs of a Sour Dough" and later in this country called "The Spell of the Yukon," the first edition was printed of a book which stands as one of the most popular books of verse of the last twenty-five years. It has been reprinted scores of times, and issued in a dozen different forms, and the total sale runs into hundreds of thousands of copies.

This book was followed before long by a second volume, "Ballads of a Cheechako" and "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone," and by a novel in which the author gave a picture of his experiences in the great Klondike rush called "The Trail of Ninety-Eight."

Leaving the Klondike for civilization Mr. Service followed the precepts of the rolling stone and wandered about. As an example of his disposition, at one time he suddenly decided, when living in New York, to go to Washington, and set forth on foot, as this method of travel seemed to him much more interesting than by rail.

Later he wandered across the ocean, knocked about the Balkans a little, and at last settled down in France, where he married a French girl. During the great war he served a long and arduous term as a driver of the Red Cross ambulance, and incidentally wrote his "Rhymes of a Red Cross Man," a book which probably stands among the six most widely read in the English language about the great war. Mr. Service spends part of his time in Paris and part in Monte Carlo. He has developed a system for participating in the pleasures of that gambler's paradise which only a canny Scotchman could evolve and carry out. It would be unfair to disclose the system, but it may be said that whoever loses Mr. Service does not.

Recently Mr. Service and his family returned to this country, traveled around awhile and finally wandered as far as Tahiti. The author felt inclined to continue his wanderings to New Guinea, Borneo and wherever he could find new and wild country to visit. But as his family do not wholly share his rolling stone propensities he decided to return to New York, where he has in the hands of his publishers a novel dealing with his experiences at Monte Carlo. It is called "The Poisoned Paradise."

Penguin Persons And Peppermints

PENGUIN PERSONS AND PEPPERMINTS. By Walter Prichard Eaton. W. A. Wilde Company.

IT has come to be a literary ruling that wherever there are printed penguins they belong, flappers and souls, to Anatole France. That's forgetful of Ruskin, who also found uses for penguins—and Walter Prichard Eaton quotes and trains them to purposes of his own. Ruskin wrote from London in 1860:

When I begin to think at all I get into states of disgust and fury at the way the mob is going on (meaning by the mob chiefly dukes, crown princes and such like persons) that I choke and have to go to the British Museum and look at penguins till I get cool. I find penguins at present the only comfort in life. One feels everything in the world so sympathetically ridiculous; one can't be angry when one looks at a penguin.

Certainly nobody ever began an essay on a happier premise than Mr. Eaton begins his on "Penguin Persons." Other essays and sketches there are in this latest of his books; two dozen others, in fact, and all well put, chuckling with a proper pensiveness, aromatic and cordial. But it is in his first of them that Mr. Eaton tells perhaps the most and tells it best. A Penguin Person is, it seems, possessed of a comfortable, personal ridiculousness that transcends wit, sublimates drollery and canonizes him as something more than "the life of the party." By his Penguinity shall ye know him—and love him. Also laugh at him. Your laughter is his Penguinal value.

Mr. Eaton points out that Penguin Persons are the saviors of times of stress and nervousness. Good natured, light headed copy readers are the salt of city desks, he says. And, no doubt, of coal mines, canal zones and first line trenches. The sad rejoinder is this: that foremen, overseers and officers usually belong, by virtue of their salaries and shoulder bars, to a solemner branch of the animal kingdom which wouldn't know a Penguin Person from a parsnip. A Penguin Person may be loved and back slapped by many—but he'll never be a bank president.

Having at any rate established a delightful sort of literary Penguinacity, Mr. Eaton goes on to discuss, in these essays of fifteen years' writing, a multitude of things poetic, dramatic, reminiscent, romantic, with woods and gardens crossed by city streets and middle age sprigged with the philosophy of mumblety peg. When he speaks of the theater, as he does in more than one compartment, he exercises the authority of an expert and a critic; when he sings of song—he has a delightful defense of the one fingered method—he sings with an ardor that whimsicality can't cool. When he goes at verse and versifiers it is as both a writer and a reader, carpenter and customer.

He breaks, for instance, one long lance in memory of a forgotten American poet, Frederick Goddard Tuckerman—the Robert Frost of 1864, he characterizes him. He discusses "New Poetry and the Lingering Line" and you'll agree with him, willy nilly, whether or not you grant that reciting is the test of verse. He reaches back, by the aid of a memory gem book to all the nice little quotations (mostly from Longfellow, be assured) that made his youth moral and miserable.

Sometimes, as in the urban pictures of a panorama that he calls "The Twilight Veil," or as in the sappy springtimes he describes from a New England garden and a Tennessee hollow, Mr. Eaton's prose is a rich treat, banquet grand. Sometimes, in observations like "The Bubble, Reputation," it is crisp and crackling salad:

"Who was Lord Raglan?" he asks, "or was he a lord? He is a kind of overcoat sleeve now. Who was Mr. Mackintosh? Was it Lord Brougham, too? Gasoline has extinguished his immortality. Gladstone has become a bag, Gainsborough is a hat. The beautiful Madame Pompadour, beloved of kings, is a kind of hair cut now. The Mikado of Japan is a joke, set to music, heavenly music, to be sure, but with its tongue in its angelic cheek. . . ."

The miscellany is quite all as nimble minded as that. It ends, as all good meals should, with "Peppermints." You have been sitting at table in New York, the Cumberland Plateau, Twin Fires and many other places. All of them, thanks to an artist in hospitable and holiday mood, are Penguinsome places.

GILBERT W. GABRIEL.

BULLINGER'S Postal and Shippers Guide appears in its fifty-first annual number from the press of the New England Railway Publishing Company, 67 Federal street, Boston, Mass., covering its field, which includes the United States and Canada, in its usual comprehensive manner. It gives post offices, rail and marine routes, express services and the like for shippers, and brings together in compact form a great deal of geographical and political information of value to business men and travelers. This Guide serves a most useful purpose in the office, the counting room and the shipping room.